Looking Through the Eyes of Others: assessing mutual expectations and experiences in order to shape dialogue and collaboration between business and NGOs with respect to CSR

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What are the main differences in expectations between NGOs and companies who interact with each other with respect to corporate social responsibility (CSR)? This is the leading question for a research project within the framework of the Dutch National Research Program on CSR (2003–2004). The research starts with the observation that companies and NGOs are increasingly interacting regarding CSR. Exploring the mutual expectations in the early stages of an interaction can deliver valuable information about the possibilities for cooperation. In order to study these expectations and experiences, a web-based tool is developed. The application of this tool results in the relevant gaps between mutual expectations and the comparison of expectations expressed in the beginning of the interaction with the actual experiences.

Keywords: Stakeholders, collaboration, partnerships, CSR, SERVQUAL, web-based tool

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Introduction

This contribution perceives corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a global movement addressing the role, function and responsibilities of organisations in a fundamentally changing society. For this, organisations are perceived as networks of relations between parties that all have stakes in the functioning of certain organisations (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson and Preston, 1995). Certain external parties have the legitimate right and desire to influence the going-concern of organisations in order to achieve specific goals. To respond appropriately to those needs and expectations – and at the same time to handle the dilemmas arising as a consequence of incompatibility between them – can be considered a core element of the responsibilities of managers of an organisation. Balancing these conflicts in a legitimate manner is what CSR is all about (Jonker, 2003).

To address these dilemmas, new forms of collaboration are becoming increasingly important. In order to develop possible collaboration, understanding mutual expectations between the parties involved becomes key. This raises questions like which elements generate the foundation for different parties to engage in collaboration on CSR? How can the process of communicating with one another, which might lead to a possible collaboration, be structured? What are the dilemmas involved and how can they be approached in a constructive way? To address these questions a research project was granted within the framework of the Dutch National Research Program on CSR. This contribution provides an overview of the results of this project.

The aim is to create explicit understanding between those parties by comparing issues of CSR in a systematic way based upon a practical approach to the field. It does so by developing a web-based self-assessment tool shaped upon the SERVQUAL methodology. The result of this tool is a dedicated agenda for dialogue to be used at the start of a collaboration between the parties involved. This agenda is based on a gradually emerging data set providing an overview of the different expectations around CSR. This article presents the conceptual background for modelling the interactions between companies and NGOs as well as the developed instrument that is available as a web-based tool.

Background of business–NGO interactions

In order to understand the dynamics of the interactions between businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) it is important analyse the social movement underlying these interactions. This movement, generally referred to as corporate social responsibility or corporate citizenship, relates to the fundamental debate on the institutional set up of society and the roles and responsibilities of public and private parties in it (Habisch *et al*., 2004; Matten and Moon, 2004). Looking at social aspects is not a new phenomenon for private firms. Industrialists have for a long time already been looking at broader issues than just profits, whether it is the housing for employees, their cultural development or employment in general. What is new, though, is the intensity and breadth of the efforts made by private firms as well as the increasingly strong societal demand for behaving more ethically and responsibly and the complexity and dynamics of the networks of stakeholders companies have to interact with (Elkington, 1999; SER, 2001). This line of reasoning is also expressed in the EU Green Paper on "Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility" (2001, p. 5) defining CSR as a "concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis". In this perception of CSR it is recognised that companies have responsibilities towards all their stakeholder groups – and not just their shareholders – which are above and beyond that required by law. This definition was maintained in the subsequent White Paper (EU, 2002).

The development towards CSR implies a continuous learning process through which organisations learn how to deal with increasingly complex issues, in interaction with an increasingly wide range of stakeholders. Roome states in this respect: "moving up the innovation hierarchy increases the complexity of the issues, the numbers of actors involved in change, and the number of linked, multiple technological and social options, the innovations and new practices that need to be undertaken and the uncertainties that have to be considered" (2001, p. 3). Whereas companies once interacted primarily with shareholders, its customers and local regulators, CSR now requires the involvement of all kinds of actors, and probably from beyond their usual production and consumption systems. They need to position themselves in the changing interaction processes with NGOs and private and public actors through which the new responsibilities are articulated.

Companies must learn how far they need to extend their responsibilities, what issues to take up, how to give meaning to those issues and how to successfully combine economic, social and environmental strategies. The rationale for this lies not only in the shortcomings of traditional models of interaction, but perhaps more importantly in the complexity of sustainable development, which necessitates a redefinition of the roles traditionally played by government and the private sector. "Compliance to regulation" is simply not an adequate approach to achieving sustainability (De Bruijn and Tukker, 2002). Rather, public policies must focus on how to use the creativity of all the actors in the production and consumption system beyond the level that has been stimulated by command-and-control strategies. This requires dialogue and consultation, collaboration and the formation of new partnerships (WBCSD, 2001).

Despite the fact that during this decade many organisations have smoothly adapted to the language of CSR, the risk is still not imaginary that CSR will become one of the many management hypes. If CSR is to develop from solid ground, it is necessary to foster its future development through embedding societal issues and expectations raised by legitimate stakeholders in the day-to-day strategies, policies and operations of the organisation. These issues and expectations should be addressed in common by relevant stakeholders and the organisation they concern. So far ideas of *managing* the needs and expectations have dominated the debate regarding stakeholders. The notion of "managing" implies a one-sided "monologue" initiated and controlled by the organisation. This project wants to give an impulse to the practice of the stakeholder debate and engagement through creating conditions for a dialogue.

This paper concentrates on the development of these stakeholder engagements. Based on interaction, the relationships between companies and stakeholders lead to a whole range

Table 1: Complementary resources and competencies (adopted from Waddell, 1999)

	Business	NGOs
Resources	– Financial assets – Production systems – Specialised industry knowledge – Business reputation	– Inspirational and volunteer assets – Community networks – Specialised community/issue knowledge – Community reputation
Competencies	– Efficiency-focused activity – Profit generation – Management skills – Business networks – Delivery of goods	– Issue development – Trust generation – Support for vulnerable and marginalised issues – Community organising skills

of results, varying from a confrontational approach based on public attack to a co-operational approach based on joint interests. Despite positive intentions, the interactions are complex and unpredictable and therefore difficult to guide in a specific direction. The dialogue that needs to take place between the parties involved is guided and shaped by a confrontation of different world-views, risks and interests. Furthermore the dialogue could be blurred – if not distorted – by correct or incorrect perceptions the parties involved hold towards each other. As a result, confusion or distrust might occur in the participating organisations. It also might lead to fragmentation and inactivity (Livesey and Crane, 2002). So a dialogue is by definition a time-consuming and fragile process requiring specific competencies. If it does not take into account the backgrounds of different stakeholders and the rules of the game, it is doomed to fail right from the beginning.

The notion of stakeholders is limited in this research to NGOs. NGOs have gradually developed into global actors that seek to engage with powerful institutions to create social transformation. While business seems to have become the dominant institution in society, NGOs more and more seek to influence this institution in various ways (Shah, 2001). Recent decades have demonstrated a plethora of activities and campaigns reflecting this increasing influence. It can be observed that in more recent years the antagonistic stance NGOs once held towards business is making way for a more collaborative approach (Nordic Partnership, 2004). Some of the NGOs foster alignment with business to gain access to competencies and resources they require. On the other hand NGOs have other complimentary competencies and resources – such as networks, knowledge and experience – that have become relevant to business in the light of the growing complexity and interdependence of emerging issues with which they are confronted like Governance, HIV, Reputation, Risk and Accountability.

Waddell (1999) systematically summarised the complementary resources and competencies in which NGOs and business can find a rationale for aligning their interests and develop forms of mutual collaboration through their respective organisations (Table 1).

These potential complementarities of resources and competencies result in an array of possible forms of interaction and collaboration, with labels like Global Issues Network (GIN) (Rischard, 2002), Multi-stakeholder Process (MSP) (Hemmatti *et al.*, 2002) and Social Partnership (SP) (Nelson and Zadek, 2000). Within those often overlapping forms, aims for collaboration are for example to (1) execute projects in common, (2) the agenda setting of issues for various constituencies, (3) arrange complementarities of knowledge in diverse fields, or (4) provide access to incongruent networks. Taking a closer look at these emerging forms and aims of interaction and collaboration it can be concluded that recently – in the past 5–7 years – we are witnessing innovation in the field of collaboration. A collaboration that is essentially based on dialogue. In the next section the notion of dialogue is analysed based on the theory of Communicative Action of Habermas.

The art of dialogue

The interaction of NGOs and companies is ultimately about exchanging opinions, about influencing each other into a certain direction, about informing each other, in other words: about dialogue. This is not a power-free dialogue. On the contrary, the parties involved enter the dialogue with all their interests, expectations, emotions and possibilities to influence each other. Although power, or the threat to use power, plays an important role in the interactions between companies and NGOs, the dialogue has its added value in coming to some kind of an agreement. This requires from both parties a learning process to understand each other's needs. This is a first important obstacle for an effective interaction because in most cases NGOs and companies enter the dialogue with totally different worldviews (Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

Communication contributes to the process of balancing interests by offering the ability to reach mutual understanding on norms to be applied, and on whether these norms are any good at all. Communication also allows the expression and evaluation of intentions as well as deliberation about the common understanding of facts and their appliance. It also requires a common language in order to discuss the issues at stake. Many outcomes of research on partnerships and other forms of interaction show that the concepts and words used can result in miscommunication, a tendency to blame each other and therefore frustration of both NGOs and companies. Communication, then, plays a key role in the process of balancing interests. To understand what this role is and how it can contribute to the issue of realising CSR, the notion of communication is explored by means of Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) (van der Linden and Jonker, 2004).

Habermas draws a distinction between two forms of action, viz. strategic action and communicative action. He argues that, based on the philosophy of consciousness, there is a tendency for most people and organisations to engage in strategic action, which involves the egoistic achievement of specific outcomes. Success is judged by "the efficiency of influencing the decisions of rational opponents" (Habermas, 1982, p. 264). In other words, there is no need to reach understanding between those involved, but simply to *influence* the decision of the other. This influence is not usually achieved via discourse through language, but by "sanctions, gratifications, force or money" (Habermas, 1982).

This compares with communicative action that is oriented towards shared understanding and in which language is used as a medium by which communication is reached. This means that the "partners in interaction set out, and manage, to convince each other, so that their action is coordinated on the basis of motivation through reason" (Brand, 1990, p. 46). External sanctions or gratifications are not involved.

The view presented here is that organisations involve a coalition of interests of stakeholders and, like the larger society of which they are a part, in order to achieve their ends communicative action is required. This is an inter-subjective activity involving the inter-subjective achievement of shared understanding. Habermas defines communicative action as "that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-ordinated through the exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language – or corresponding non-verbal expressions – oriented towards reaching understanding" (Habermas, 1982, p. 234). To reach understanding, those involved set out to convince each other so that their action is coordinated on the basis of motivation through reason.

The achievement of understanding does not deny that the parties have individual ends. Rather, these are pursued under the condition of a communicatively produced understanding of the given situation they face. Moreover, it suggests that these individual ends are best pursued in this way. Understanding is reached through the process of discourse involving claims couched in language. While this may be a very complex and political activity, at least a temporary agreement can be reached on the basis of rationality and reason. The latter is arrived at through the inter-subjective analysis of disputable validity claims within different "worlds". The consequence of this is that organisations have to engage in a dialogic process within and beyond the boundaries of the organisation in order to engage significant stakeholders. This project aims at improving effective forms of dialogue by expressing the expectations towards each other beforehand, thus creating a common ground for communication.[1]

Developing a methodology and conceptual model

Based on the theoretical notion above, a method was developed to analyse stakeholder expectations on the one hand and compare this with their expectations on the other in order to determine satisfaction. The method is based on an adaptation of the SERVQUAL methodology originally developed by Zeithaml *et al*. (1990). This is a tested method for measuring the possible (mis)match between expectations of customers and the delivered products and services. Although the relevant criteria for measuring a possible (mis)match between needs and expectations of NGOs and companies are quite different from customers, it is the assumption in this paper that the methodology of SERVQUAL is also applicable to expectations of other stakeholders. An important reason for this assumption is that character of stakeholder relations, whether it concerns customers, NGOs or other parties, are all characterised by the same kind of criteria like power, legitimacy and urgency of stakeholder claims (Mitchell *et al*., 1997). Furthermore, the SERVQUAL methodology not only encompasses the actual delivery of services but also the perceptions and communication about these services. This is also a crucial starting point in the interactions between NGOs and companies where dialogue and consultation is required for the formation of new partnerships (WBCSD, 2001). Based on this assumption an adopted, simplified model of SERVQUAL has been developed, aimed at measuring the possible (mis)match between needs and expectations of NGOs and companies. The measurement will take place through mirrored questionnaires that are based on theory-based indicators. This results in the conceptual model in Figure 1.

The conceptual model shows which relations are being measured and what will be compared. Gap 1 aims to examine the possible (mis)match between the expectations that are held beforehand by both parties. A comparison between these expectations will reveal the degree of matching based on a number of indicators that frame these expectations. In this way crucial differences become apparent in the way they provide input for an agenda for dialogue. Gap 2 and 3 examine the possible (mis)match between the expectations in advance at $t = 0$, and the experiences during or after the collaboration. This comparison assesses the result of the actual collaboration and seeks to trace the satisfaction of the parties. Gap 4 determines the (mis)match between mutual experiences. This gap also serves as an evaluation of shared experiences. By tracing these differences and shared experiences in the perception of the different parties based upon the collaboration process, new insights can be gained. Gap 4 ultimately can serve as the basis for prolonged agenda setting supporting improved effectiveness of the collaboration.

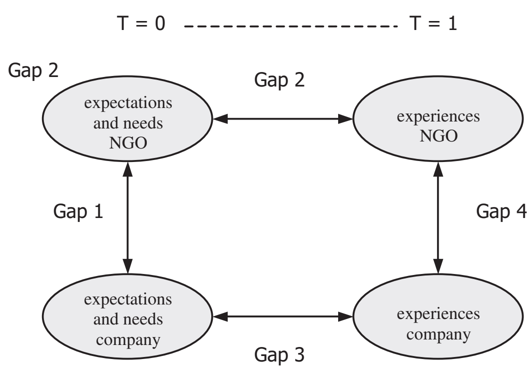

Figure 1: Conceptual model based upon SERVQUAL

Developing indicators

Many factors determine the expectations of the parties involved. In order to start measuring the expectations in a more systematic way, "sensitising concepts" have been formulated. Sensitising concepts are pre-theoretical in nature and help to focus what most probably needs to be assessed. The sensitising concepts here are derived from open interviews with representatives from companies (seven) and from NGOs (eleven). Next, the outcomes of the interviews were compared with an extensive review of literature with respect to CSR, stakeholder theory and partnerships. We included the sensitising concepts only in our model when they were also addressed in literature. Through this approach a set of criteria was developed presumed to determine the expectations of the parties involved. Each of these criteria possesses an underlying dimension expressing the width of a specific criterion. These criteria and their dimensions can be summarised as follows:

1. Issue: multi versus single.
2. Collaboration: dialogue versus action.
3. Values: idealism versus business proposition.
4. Legitimacy: individuals versus organisation.
5. Independence: commitment versus autonomy.
6. Transparency: "tell-me" versus "show-me".
7. Impact: marginal versus core-business.

These criteria are rather abstract in nature and difficult to measure. Therefore they need to be translated into indicators, which makes the actual measurement possible. The development of these indicators is based on the study of relevant literature in the fields of CSR, stakeholder theory and partnerships. Furthermore, a workshop session was organised with practitioners to discuss the recognisability and completeness of a concept version of the measurement instrument.

The first criterion concerns the issue around which the parties intend to engage in. Hardy and Phillips (1998, p. 221) refer to it as: ". . . the organisational domain that emerges as different organisations perceive themselves connected to a common issue." It is a – if not "the" – determining indicator for the further development of a collaborative process. This criterion can be operationalised into several indicators (Bendell, 2000; Stafford and Hartman, 1996; Malena, 2004; Kernel, 2005; Belou *et al*., 2003). The first indicator concerns the rationale of the parties to get involved with each other. A second indicator concerns the degree of shared recognition of the problem(s) at hand. Furthermore the degree of commonality in vision of the parties involved concerning how to address the issue in the future provides a third indicator.

The second criterion addresses the issue of trust. The degree of trust can be regarded as crucial to the actual interaction process (Bendell, 2000; Greenall and Rovere, 1999; Zadek, 2004). It is assumed that a basic level of trust at the start needs to be plain in order to be able to engage a constructive and fruitful dialogue. During the actual process of collaboration around a specific issue the level of trust needs to be developed in order to foster the relations. Indicators that contribute to trust are long-term commitment and respect for different value systems and worldviews between the different parties.

The legitimacy on which the parties engage in collaboration provides the third criterion. This criterion focuses on the conditions that legitimise the parties' rights to engage. It also refers to the representation of actual persons that will exemplify the contact between the parties (Belou *et al*., 2003; Stafford *et al*., 2000; Phillips, 2002; Zadek, 2004; Covey and Brown, 2001). The first indicator refers to the critical mass (in terms of competencies, professionalism and organisational resources) necessary to be perceived as a relevant and potentially satisfactory partner. This indicator addresses in particular NGOs while experiences show that a lack of professionalism and resources can be an important obstacle in developing a constructive relationship (Belou *et al*., 2003). The complementarity and recognition of capabilities and resources are also conditions that legitimise joint activities. The focus of the last indicator is on the personal authority of the parties. It is the authority of the interlocutor to make decisions that imply commitment for the organisation as a whole.

The fourth criterion focuses on the actual process of collaboration. Within this criterion the indicators that determine expectations are diverse (Malena, 2004; Kaptein and van Tulder, 2002; Phillips, 2002). We take account of the operational coordination, long-term commitment and sharing of risks. The awareness and flexibility to respond to changing environmental demands also provide an indicator. Furthermore, past experiences from the parties involved in similar processes need to be taken into account.

The fifth criterion deals with the transparency of the future collaboration. Sharing relevant and useful information beforehand and during a project is a prerequisite for effective interaction. This will enhance building trust and enable understanding of the often different worldviews. The literature provides several indicators (Shah, 2001; Phillips, 2002; Malena, 2004). The first indicator in this respect is the reliability of the exchanged information. Second the possibility for third-party or other forms of external verification. A third indicator addresses the nature of the (joint) communication towards other relevant actors. Finally a potentially threatening practice of NGOs to take action while being in dialogue with a company needs to be taken into account.

The sixth criterion focuses on the independence of the parties involved. Both parties have the ability to compromise each other in the light of possible conflicting value systems and underlying assumptions. This criterion points to the risks that can accompany close contacts between NGOs and business showing the reverse-side of collaboration (Phillips, 2002; Stafford *et al*., 2000; Covey and Brown, 2001; Livesey and Crane, 2002). So a first indicator is the loss of legitimacy and credibility of the NGO if its support is derived from an anti-business stance. Risks are further misuse of information and undesired exposure of the collaboration at hand to third parties.

The last criterion points at the impact that both parties aim for and what is actually achieved. Impact refers to possible direct and indirect results and is as such crucial in the development of patterns of expectation. Indicators are (a) linkage of activities with the core business of the organisation, (b) clarity of common understanding of goals and results at the start, (c) demonstrable achievement of results over a short period of time in order to gain (organisational and personal) support, (c) impact of the new collaboration on (internal or external) third parties and finally (d) mutual learning (Ashman, 2001; Bendell, 2000; Greenall and Rovere, 1999; Stafford *et al*., 2000).

Each of these indicators and subsequent criteria has been translated into a concise questionnaire of 35 questions (see Table 2). This questionnaire was then mirrored for both of the parties involved trying to frame expectations and experiences at the start of a possible collaboration. After a discussion of the questionnaire with several representatives of businesses and NGOs, a web-based tool was developed. This tool enables respondents to answer the various questions on a Likert five-point scale. In October 2004 the tool was released and disseminated through dedicated

Table 2: Questionnaire for assessing expectations in order to shape dialogue and collaboration

Version: Questions from the viewpoint of a non-governmental organisation

Criteria and related indicators	Question type
Criterion 1: Issue	
1. I think the primary motive of company X to start a dialogue with us is to:	Multiple choice
○ improve their reputation	
○ meet expectations and needs of customers	
○ help convince managers to pursue CSR	
○ obtain direct financial benefits	
○ influence governmental regulation	
2. It is clear to me how company X perceives this issue	7 point scale
3. I want to invest time to reach a mutual problem definition	7 point scale
4. During our collaborative activities, I hope company X will be able to make the following key contribution:	Multiple choice
○ financial resources	
○ network of organisational facilities	
○ influence at government level	
○ increased customer awareness	
○ knowledge to develop better and new products/services	
○ pioneer role in supply chain	
○ market expertise	
○ reputation/goodwill	
5. We are willing to contribute the following key competence:	Multiple choice
○ financial resources	
○ influence at government level	
○ increased customer awareness	
○ knowledge of new and better products/services	
○ reputation	
○ market knowledge	
Criterion 2: Cooperation	
1. During the collaborative activities with company X we particularly seek to:	Multiple choice
○ influence public opinion	
○ put the issue on the corporate agenda	
○ urge the government to action	
○ initiate joint projects	
○ achieve improvements within the company	
○ raise media attention	
2. We expect company X to particularly seek to:	Multiple choice
○ pursue collaboration aimed at solutions	
○ legitimise corporate activities	
○ gain access to valuable information	
○ develop market chances	
3. We would like to be primarily involved in:	Multiple choice
○ policy-making processes concerning the issue at stake	
○ developing performance indicators	
○ drawing up actions plans	
○ implementing action plans	
○ meetings to discuss project progress	
○ we do not want to be involved at all	

Table 2: Continued

Version: Questions from the viewpoint of a non-governmental organisation	
Criteria and related indicators	Question type
4. We have all relevant experience to discuss this issue with company X	7 point scale
5. We expect company X to have all relevant experience with this problem area	7 point scale
6. When the circumstances change we are willing to react flexibly	7 point scale
7. If we are going to collaborate on a certain issue I expect company X to commit itself for a longer time	7 point scale
Criterion 3: Values	
1. I have confidence in the proper intentions of company X	7 point scale
2. I expect company X in advance to have confidence in our proper intentions	7 point scale
3. Owing to the market mechanism we expect company X to have no room to act appropriately in this matter	7 point scale
4. Differences in our values present an important obstacle	7 point scale
Criterion 4: Legitimacy	
1. When we make a deal I expect company X to back it up	7 point scale
2. When we make a deal we back it up	7 point scale
3. It is important that our collaboration also influences the government	7 point scale
4. We have all necessary resources to participate in this project	7 point scale
Criterion 5: Independence	
1. I am willing to seek compromises to establish a common point of departure/starting point	7 point scale
2. I have the impression that company X recognises the serious nature of the problem area	7 point scale
3. I think company X wants to involve other NGOs in this issue	7 point scale
4. We would like company X to involve other NGOs in this issue	7 point scale
5. By working with company X we would lose our credibility	7 point scale
Criterion 6: Transparency	
1. I would like the progress of this project to be externally monitored	7 point scale
2. During the project I expect the external communication to be managed jointly	7 point scale
3. If we are provided with incorrect information we will immediately terminate the collaboration	7 point scale
4. Our organisation will not take action as long as we are in dialogue with company X	7 point scale
Criterion 7: Impact	
1. We expect this project to have an impact on the core activities of company X	7 point scale
2. We shall not start the project unless the goals and result are clearly determined	7 point scale
3. We strive for visible results in the short term	7 point scale

databases and an e-mail alert to approximately 20,000 people. A discussion of the results of this empirical study is not included here because this would fall outside the scope of this paper.

Conclusions and discussion

The presented model, its criteria and indicators are constructed in a way that leads to a valid and hopefully reliable tool. The further application of the model will depend on whether the actual users of the tool perceive value in its use. Ultimately this is only the case when parties wanting to engage in a possible collaboration can indeed achieve the desired outcomes they expect from this collaboration. Based on the research done so far it is possible to present the most important theoretical and methodological outcomes.

Theoretical outcome is an elaborated conceptual model of the stakeholder interaction (NGO and business) based upon a concise and thorough analysis of existing literature. Desk research has led to the identification of seven criteria that are deemed relevant to structure a possible collaboration. These criteria are: (1) Issue, (2) Collaboration, (3) Values, (4) Legitimacy, (5) Independence, (6) Transparency and (7) Impact. Each of these criteria was further elaborated into indicators leading to the construction of a questionnaire.

Methodological outcome is the development of an assessment device or tool based upon a synthesis of already existing conceptual models enriched with the input of various stakeholders. The model is structured upon an adopted and simplified version of the SERVQUAL methodology. This tool has a "stand-alone" character. It can be issued on the Internet.[2] Users are asked to fill in a short questionnaire. Once done, they are provided with a benchmark of their answers compared to a database developed through previous respondents. The tool has been released in Dutch and English versions.

Next to the theoretical and methodological outcomes, the goal throughout the project has been to support businesses and NGOs who have the intention to form some kind of joint activity, maybe in the form of a partnership, and to provide them with practical means to create this collaboration in an explicit and transparent manner. The developed tool enables them to assess mutual needs and expectations at the start of this collaboration. Furthermore it enables them to identify the characteristics of the (desired) collaboration and to communicate about it. At present, a number of issues also remain open for debate. Without any pretensions to be comprehensive we would like to stipulate the following.

(a) Implicitly a rather mechanistic view is taken in this research project. Based upon explicit assumptions about collaboration it still is unable to capture the "human chemistry" between people. Despite the fact that the use and outcome of the developed model can offer ample ground for a fruitful collaboration, it remains impossible to capture the emotion that is a fundamental prerequisite for collaboration. Unmistakably, trust – as one of the criteria in the model – is a key component, yet does not cover the sentiments at stake.
(b) Although the presented list of criteria seems to represent rather accurately what is at stake when engaging in a possible collaboration, it is neither exhaustive nor can the interdependency between them be taken into account. The weight of these criteria will differ between the parties involved. It will also differ depending on previous experiences, the business sector, the actual people engaged in the discourse and so on.
(c) Based upon a number of considerations presented above, we have developed an adopted version of the SERVQUAL methodology. In doing so we have abandoned an important part of this methodology, namely the way the organisation actually translates expectations into products and/or services. This organisational aspect of the SERVQUAL methodology allows for subsequent discussions around issues such as the actual organisation of possible partnerships, its transparency and accountability.
(d) In the SERVQUAL methodology a weight is given by the respondents to their scores. In the present version of our adopted model we have intentionally chosen to leave this feature aside. Now that the first release is in full gear, it might become appropriate to add this methodological feature to the instrument. The risk of the chosen approach is that the provided score will not have enough distinctive power.
(e) A final issue is how the stakeholders will perceive the usefulness of the instrument. Leaving aside issues of reliability, the core remains to create added value for the parties involved. This added value comes about in, for example, consensus concerning the issue at stake, the way it will be approached or the contributions of the parties involved. We assume that it is only in the actual testing and subsequent use that this practical added value can be demonstrated.

Despite all these hurdles, businesses and NGOs can still achieve important progress with regard to societal issues. The instrument presented here is a first step in helping to identify important gaps that might frustrate the upcoming collaboration. Common understanding and clear arrangements can diminish problems based on misunderstanding further down the process of collaboration. This way effective interaction and dialogue is improved and real value added for those involved.

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Notes

1. This section is based upon Foster and Jonker (2004 – work in progress, unpublished).
2. The questionnaire can be opened at http://www.bni-instrument.org

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